

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 322 529

CS 212 479

AUTHOR Gilles, Roger
TITLE Teaching the Rhetoric of News Photography.
PUB DATE Mar 90
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (41st, Chicago, IL, March 22-24, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Critical Viewing; *Discourse Modes; Evaluation Methods; Expository Writing; Higher Education; News Writing; Photographs; *Photojournalism; Pictorial Stimuli; Rhetoric; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Rhetorical Strategies; Visual Journalism

ABSTRACT

Composition instructors need to emphasize to their students that persuasion is not always announced--it can be forcefully present in so-called "objective" forms of discourse like textbooks and news. News photographs can be successfully used in the composition classroom as a unit of study in visual rhetoric to introduce students to the direct relationship existing between visual representations and written texts. The unit proposed is relatively short, 2 to 3 weeks of class time. It includes the choosing and discussion of a general topic or issue for analysis, the collection of data (news photographs and accompanying articles), the introduction of several analytical techniques (such as the face-ism index, agent/patient analysis, and creating narratives) that can be used to argue for a particular "reading" of one or more photographs, and the writing of a brief analytical essay focusing on a single photo or a series of photos. The purpose of this unit goes beyond introducing students to the study of new photography, however. The culminating essay also reinforces the notion that analysis and interpretation depend on more than the mere presentation of evidence: writers must also provide carefully reasoned discussions that explain how their evidence supports their interpretation. (KEH)

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Roger Gilles
English Department
Modern Languages 445
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona 85721

Teaching the Rhetoric of News Photography

As Kenneth Burke points out, the term rhetoric comprises not just the use of persuasive tools (the traditional domain of the composition classroom), but also the study of them (36). As rhetoric becomes a more central part of the composition curriculum, more and more instructors are including supplemental texts as objects worthy of study in themselves, and not simply as models for imitation. The thinking here is that not all students will do all kinds of writing, but all students will, as citizens, be exposed to the full range of rhetorical expressions our society has to offer. Teachers of rhetoric and composition need to prepare students to be "rhetorically literate"--capable of recognizing, analyzing, and evaluating rhetoric in all its forms.

Traditionally, composition has been limited to the study of academic discourse, particularly persuasive writing (essays). More recently, the rhetorical component of expository writing (research reports, educational texts) has been recognized, and many instructors now include readings from across the curriculum in their composition classrooms. They see that in order to succeed in college students need to be able to understand and produce both persuasive and expository academic discourse. However, academic discourse is not the only kind of discourse

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that our students will be exposed to during and after college. There is also "public" discourse. Like academic discourse, public discourse can be persuasive (advertising, political speeches) and expository (news, government and corporate documents). I believe that in order to prepare our students for the rigors of democracy as well as those of academics, we need to strike a better balance between the study of public and academic discourse in the composition classroom.

This paper presents one way to introduce students to the rhetoric of expository public discourse. Many composition instructors, myself included, already include the study of advertising (persuasive public discourse) in their classes, but like academic essays, advertisements are overtly persuasive documents that in most cases "announce" their rhetorical intentions. We need to emphasize to our students that persuasion is not always so announced--that it can be as forcefully present even in so-called "objective" forms of discourse like textbooks and news.

The study of discourse in the composition classroom, then, can take at least four forms. (Some may wish to add "expressive discourse," or literature, to the persuasive and expository forms, but since few composition programs ask students to read and write literature, I will ignore it here; in effect, most composition programs treat literature either as persuasive writing--writing that contains a theme, a purpose--or as expository writing--writing that "exposes" something about the

writer or the writer's world.) I believe we should encourage the study of both the public and academic forms of persuasive and expository discourse:

	PERSUASIVE DISCOURSE (announced persuasion)	EXPOSITORY DISCOURSE (unannounced persuasion)
ACADEMIC DISCOURSE	essays, literature	textbooks, research reports
PUBLIC DISCOURSE	advertisements, political speeches	news, public documents

Once we decide to study expository public discourse, we must consider a further breakdown: not all discourse is written. An important component of much public discourse--from advertisements to political material to daily news--is visual. The study of images is fast becoming as important as the study of words. In this paper, I suggest that a useful and pertinent way to introduce the study of news discourse is to study the visual record of a particular news topic. News photographs are well-suited to study in the classroom for several reasons. They are, first of all, a convenient access to the news: students can page through newspapers or microfilms and easily identify and examine the photographs. Photographs also work well because they can be collected, studied, discussed, and written about in a relatively short time, leaving plenty of course time for the study of the other forms of public and academic discourse. And the study of

news photographs encourages the careful (and, significantly, student-motivated) reading of accompanying news articles: students spot a photograph and, in order to understand it, they read the caption and whatever related stories surround it. So photographs provide a good introduction to newspaper reading in general. And finally, as I've mentioned, studying news photographs introduces students to the study of visual rhetoric, a type of rhetoric that is becoming more crucial with every passing year. The field of Composition needs to open itself to the study of visual as well as written communication; news photographs offer an excellent start in that direction since they are visual representations tied quite directly to written texts that develop and explain the pictured material. (Roland Barthes points out that ours is still very much a literate culture, despite the preponderance of images, in that most images are still accompanied by the written word; this is especially true of news images, which never appear without a caption [38]. News images, then, offer a useful introductory form of image study that serves as a kind of transition from literary analysis.)

The unit I propose here is a short one--two to three weeks of class time--that includes the choosing and discussion of a general topic or issue for analysis, the collection of data (news photographs and accompanying articles), the introduction of several analytical techniques that can be used to argue for a particular "reading" of one or more photographs, and the writing of a brief analytical essay focusing on a single photo or a

series of photos, or both. The purpose of this unit goes beyond introducing students to the study of news photography, however. The culminating essay also reinforces the notion that analysis and interpretation depend on more than the mere presentation of evidence: writers must also provide carefully reasoned discussions that explain how their evidence supports their interpretation.

Choosing a Topic

This unit works best when the entire class focuses on a single news topic or issue. This allows the class to collect more data--more photographs and articles--and to share that data so the students can construct a better, more detailed sense of the context surrounding the news images. The topic should be an ongoing, controversial one of general interest to the students--either a political issue that is regularly covered in the news or a social issue that finds expression in regular news coverage. Social issues might include the representations of women, minorities, and foreigners in the American press. In a class focusing on gender roles, for instance, a study of women's portrayal in the news would be appropriate. In the discussion below, I focus on a political issue: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East. This issue works well because it is highly controversial, regularly covered in the national press, and because so much has been written on the "biased" coverage of the conflict. (During class discussion of the issue, I showed my

students passages from Noam Chomsky's The Fateful Triangle, which claims a pro-Israeli bias in the U.S. press, and Stephen Karetzky's The Media's War Against Israel, which claims an anti-Israeli bias.)

Regardless of the topic or issue, I feel it is important that the class--and not the instructor--decides to study it. The instructor may want to provide a list of possibilities, simply as a way to stimulate discussion on the unit, but if the students are not curious about the topic they will not enjoy the collection of data and the ensuing analysis. If the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fails to interest your students, you might decide, for example, to examine Madonna's photographic existence in popular news magazines over the past five years. In the United States, Madonna is news: she has appeared on the cover of Time, Newsweek, and Life. Studying the news is an enjoyable and enlightening activity, and your students will discover as much if they agree on a topic that genuinely interests them.

Collecting Data

The easiest and fastest way to collect a body of photographs is to select a newspaper or magazine, either local or national, and assign each student a reasonable time-period to examine. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, assigning each student one week of coverage in the New York Times produced more than two-hundred photographs published over a six-month period. If Madonna were the topic, twenty students examining one year

each in one news magazine could cover five years of coverage in four different magazines.

After students photocopy their photographs and write a brief summary of the written material surrounding them, the instructor can put together the entire body of photographs for distribution. Each student should report to the class what "happened" during his or her time period, then the class as a whole can discuss the entire period with some knowledge and perspective. This is a good time to research some outside sources as well: books and other news outlets. My class focused on the 1982 Lebanon War; since dozens of books have been published about the events of that year, we spent time looking through several such books as well as news commentaries that appeared in such diverse magazines as the New Republic, the National Review, and the Progressive. One of the important underlying assumptions of this unit is that no single news source is "true" or "objective." Considering as many news sources and editorial opinions as possible will help establish the wide range of "truths" surrounding any news issue.

Analyzing Individual Photos

Both Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall, two writers who have considered the rhetoric of news photography, agree that single photographs work on two basic levels. Barthes calls these the "linguistic" and "iconic" levels (35), and Hall calls them the level of "news value" and the "ideological level" (231). Their different terms signify the split between literal and symbolic

readings of photographs, and it seems clear that these are the two levels of analysis that any student of photography must consider.

However, since this unit is designed to take place in a composition class, I think it's both helpful and appropriate to relate these two "levels" to the traditional modes of discourse--description, narration, exposition, and argumentation--with which many Composition students are already familiar. James Moffett clarifies the four modes of discourse by attaching to each a question to which it generally responds:

"What is happening?"--description--recording

"What happened?"--narration--reporting

"What happens?"--exposition--generalizing

"What may happen?"--argumentation--theorizing (35)

This happened? News editors generally place photographs in newspapers to fulfill the descriptive and narrative functions: "This is what Mikhail Gorbachev looks like" (description), or "This happened in New York yesterday" (narration). This is what we call the literal level of the photograph. It is not, of course, always literally accurate. In the first writing option of this unit, I encourage students to question and examine the literal level of a single news photograph.

To do that, we must compare the particular representation offered by the photograph to the facts and representations found in other news and informational sources (unless we are lucky enough to be able to compare the photo with our own personal

experience--perhaps in the case of a local news photo, for instance, of a well-attended event). Of course, we can rarely objectively refute the accuracy of a photograph ("This did not happen in New York yesterday"), but we can question how well a particular photograph represents the news it portrays. Because all photographs are by nature selective and exclusive, we can evaluate the contextual accuracy of a particular representation. In this sense, we are evaluating the accuracy of a photograph as a descriptive or narrative statement of fact. This can be a crucial issue, since research has shown that readers of newspapers "read" more photographs than cutlines or stories, and that photographs capture reader attention and help direct the reading and recall of news stories (Stamm 238, Baxter 10).

Let me give an example from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In late April of 1982, Israeli jets crossed into Lebanon and bombarded several villages south of Beirut in an effort to hit P.L.O installations. The New York Times reported on April 22 that the nine-month cease-fire along the Lebanese border had been broken with the attack. However, Israel claimed that the truce remained intact, since the bombing was, in their words, a "counterattack" in response to the death of an Israeli soldier who was killed when his jeep struck an antitank mine in southern Lebanon on April 21. The P.L.O., meanwhile, suggested that it would continue to honor the truce despite Israel's latest "provocation." For all this activity, just one news photograph was printed about the story: it is a photo of Palestinian gunners

firing into the sky at the Israeli bombers. The caption reads, "Flames emerge from muzzle of Palestinian antiaircraft gun firing at Israeli planes over Damur, Lebanon" (A14).

The news photograph operates on the "This happened" level, as a narrative about the events of April 22 in Lebanon. Clearly, however, it does not--indeed, it cannot--offer a complete picture of what happened that day. Nothing in the photograph suggests that the Israeli planes are on the attack. To the casual reader, the "news" of this particular photograph could very well become: "Palestinian gunners fired on Israeli planes yesterday." If this is the case, the photograph is indeed misleading as a narrative. It has not been faked, and it really did happen, but it presents an incomplete picture of the events of April 22.

So the first kind of analysis that a student might engage in is on this literal level, examining a single news photograph in the context of that day's news. The analysis answers the question, "Does the photograph represent the surrounding news accurately?" The student can also examine outside sources of information to determine if other accounts might suggest a different "reading" of the photograph. In any event, it is important to emphasize that the student must always accompany any claims with supporting evidence and discussion. No photograph is absolutely inaccurate. Photographs may, however, be shown to be contextually inaccurate by careful argumentation and analysis.

Analyzing Groups of Photos

This happens? News photographs become even more interesting as objects of study when we consider what happens when they form patterns of representation over time. Generalization is the act of establishing patterns; over time, then, news photographs undergo an interesting shift from being descriptive or narrative to being expository. One hundred photographs that say "This happened" work together to say "This happens."

One way to establish patterns in news photography is to work out careful contextual analyses of a hundred or more photographs. This, however, is a lengthy undertaking--as students who choose to analyze the contextual accuracy of just a single photograph quickly discover. To make broader analyses more feasible, as well as to give students practice in creating and analyzing data in persuasive writing, I suggest three possible ways to collect data for analysis.

1. The face-ism index: Created in 1983 to evaluate gender roles in visual depictions, the face-ism index is a simple and interesting way to get a quick sense of the relative treatment of two or more groups in a series of photographs. The index measures facial prominence, which serves as an indicator of how favorably a viewer will perceive a person's qualities: the more prominent the face, the more favorable the perception (Archer 733).

Determining the face-ism index for a photograph is simple: you measure the size of a person's head and then the distance

from the top of the head to the lowest visible part of the body. The resulting ratio is the index. Archer found that women tended to be less "face-y" in their representations than men. In the case of thirty-five randomly selected New York Times photos of Arabs and Israelis in 1982, Arabs had a face-ism index of only .197 compared to .315 for Israelis. In other words, Israelis tended to be photographed from the waist up, in closer-range shots than the Arabs. Does this mean that the Arabs suffered an unfair portrayal in the New York Times? As always, it is up to the individual writer to interpret the data and argue for the significance he or she sees in the numbers.

2. Agent/Patient Analysis: The second analytical technique takes advantage of the linguistic connection between a photograph and a sentence, or proposition. Discourse analysts define the "agent" in a proposition as the active member, the one who performs the action of the proposition (Meyer 28). The "patient" is the one that receives action. In the sentence, "Mary talked to Bill," Mary is performing the action, so she is the agent. Bill is the patient.

In a photograph, determining the agent and patient is most often quite easy, if you stick to these guidelines:

- * the "action" of a photograph is the current activity only (for example, the Palestinian gunners cited earlier are in the role of agent because they are pictured in the act of shooting at the Israelis; the fact that they are shooting in response to an

air attack should not be considered in a propositional analysis.)

- * the person or people performing the portrayed "action" are the agents (the action might be talking, kissing, shaking hands, arresting, shooting, or burying)
- * the caption helps determine the active person in a photograph (for example, a photograph showing Presidents Reagan and Mubarak facing each other has the caption, "President Reagan greets Egyptian President Mubarak," so Reagan is the agent and Mubarak is the patient. Captions are included to help us interpret a photograph.)
- * in photographs showing only a person's face, count the pictured person as the "agent"

Determining the different roles different groups of people take on in a series of photographs is interesting, but this kind of analysis is most illuminating when you compare the different roles in particular situations. For instance, in 217 photographs covering six months, Israelis who were pictured in the New York Times took on the "agent" role 79.6% of the time, while Arabs took on the role only 56.3% of the time. However, these six months include the month of June, 1982, when Israel was engaged in a military invasion of Lebanon--so we'd expect them to be in the active role quite often. Indeed, in all June photographs, Israelis played the "agent" 89.5% of the time, clearly dominating

this period. But what roles did they take on in non-military situations? In photographs portraying "diplomatic" activities (conferences, speeches, and the like) Israelis took on the role of "agent" 75.7% of the time--still a higher percentage than the Arabs pictured in similar situations (61.3%). So, while we might expect Israelis to be shown as more active in military affairs (especially during this period), there is no clear reason why they should be so shown in diplomatic situations. This is a statistical event worth interpreting. Not all people will, of course, interpret it the same way. Again, that's where the rhetorical skills of the individual writer come into play.

3. Creating narratives: The third analytical technique I'll suggest here is the least statistical, and perhaps the most open to interpretation. Here, the analyst chooses a group of related photographs and considers them as a single "text," or narrative. For instance, one student might choose to look at all photographs that portray P.L.O. leader Yassir Arafat. What kinds of people is he pictured with? What kinds of activities is he engaged in? Does he smile a lot, or does he look dangerous and mean? When we consider a group of photographs like this, we see what casual readers might never even think about--how a particular person or event is portrayed in isolation over a certain period of time.

Two interesting "narratives" struck my class as we looked over the entire body of news photographs from the Middle East in 1982. First, there were many photographs of the Israeli armed forces engaged in their invasion of Lebanon. A running narrative

begins to develop: the Israelis cross the border, the Israelis reach the outskirts of Beirut, the Israelis arrive in Beirut. At the same time, a rather personalized account of their invasion is shown. We see the Israeli soldiers resting, greeting Lebanese villagers along the route, reuniting with relatives, stringing their drying laundry up between tanks, getting haircuts in a village barber shop, and finally, shopping in downtown Beirut. There is a real "our boy" kind of narrative developed toward the soldiers.

The second narrative involved the act of mourning in the photographs. Simply put, the Israelis were shown mourning their dead but the Arabs were not. Eight individual photographs portrayed Israeli men and women crying over coffins, participating in memorial services, or otherwise mourning a loss or tragedy. No such photographs occurred on the Arab side. This discrepancy may reveal a more "humanized" portrayal of Israelis. Clearly, all people mourn their losses, but in the New York Times in 1982--a year in which both Arabs and Israelis had plenty to mourn--it appears that Arabs do not.

Not everyone will spot the same narrative developments in a particular series of photographs. I found myself being swayed to a position sympathetic to the Palestinians. Some of my students saw the Times portrayal of the Palestinians to be consistent with their activities in the region: inhumane, aggressive, and futile. Others considered the portrayal of the Israelis to be overly militaristic. These differences of opinion opened the way for

fruitful discussion and, to me, justified the time we'd spent on the unit. Learning to examine, organize, and analyze raw data, and learning to argue one way or another about a set of data's meaning and importance is what argumentation is all about.

During the course of a unit such as this, students get valuable practice in research, data collection, analysis, and argumentation. They also become quite familiar with a newspaper or news magazine, as well as a prominent news topic or issue. It is, I am convinced, a worthwhile two or three weeks.

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